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JOHN PAUL II TO VISIT EAST TIMOR

This coming October John Paul II will visit Indonesia and East Timor. The latter, a former Portuguese colony, was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and annexed to Indonesia, as its 27th province in 1976. The United Nations still recognize the Portugese administration. So does the Vatican which has not yet recognized the annexation by Indonesia. From 1975 till 1982 Indonesia consistently disregarded the United Nations resolutions urging the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from East Timor. From 1983 onwards, resolutions on East Timor were either excluded from or adjourned in the General Assembly of the United Nations. The European Parliament, on the other hand, accepted a resolution in September 1988 condemning the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor.

It is a well known fact that the Indonesian government is looking forward to the visit of John Paul II because of its fervent hope that the Vatican will recognise the Indonesian occupation as soon as the balance shifts decisively in favour of Jakarta. A visit planned for May 1984 was cancelled, at least in part because of the Vatican's concern about human rights abuses, humanitarian needs and Timor's political identity and partly in response to an open letter, the first since the Indonesian invasion in 1975, issued by the Indonesian bishops to the East Timorese clergy.

Official statements, predictably diplomatic in phrasing, observers have noted, have been variously used to assert that the Vatican supports the East Timorese cause, and, conversely, that it is ready to recognise the Indonesian annexation of East Timor as its 27th province. The signals sent out by Rome, they stated, have been consistently ambiguous, allowing Portugal and the Indonesian government -- as well as the Timorese and Indonesian Churches -- to draw comfort for their point of view.

The Pope's visit, as is usually the case, is described as pastoral in nature but a visit to Dili from and to other Indonesian provinces cannot but have political undertones. Some questions can be asked.

- Will the visit of John Paul II lead to some softening of the Vatican regarding the issue of East Timor. This is hoped for by the Indonesian government since the Vatican, so far, has not recognized the annexation of East Timor by Indonesia. According to the pro-nuncio, Archbishop Canalini, the Vatican will not change its stand as long as the sovereignty question remains unsolved in the international forum. Will Rome continue to wait for the international community to resolve the dispute between Indonesia and East Timor before defining its policy or is this visit indicative for change? With regard to this question it is important to note that Archbishop Darmaatmadja, president of the KWI, together with representatives of the bishops' conference called on President Soeharto in preparation for their ad limina visit last May.

- It being a pastoral visit, can John Paul II openly support the plea of the Apostolic Administrator, Bishop Belo, to the Secretary General of the United Nations to start in Timor "the most normal and democratic process of a decolonisation, i.e. the holding of a referendum". So far the people of Timor have never been consulted about their present or future; they must be allowed to express their views through a plebiscite, bishop Belo wrote.

- Will John Paul II publicly restate his concern for the human rights situation in East Timor. One may recall that he, when accepting the credentials of General Sastrapoespita, the Indonesian ambassador to the Vatican, in July 1984, stated that the "Holy See continues to follow the situation in East Timor with preoccupation and with the hope that particular consideration will be given in every circumstance to the ethnic, political and cultural identity of the people". Addressing the next Indonesian Ambassador at the Vatican, Roni Kumiardi, in December 1987, John Paul II reaffirmed the Vatican's concern about the situation in East Timor and asked that "particular consideration will be given to the protection of the ethnic, religious and cultural character of the people of East Timor". The government reacted by stating that the Pope was one-sidedly informed. Comparing the two statements the second one is but a watered down version of the 1984 statement. Strong words as "pre-occupied" and the reference to concern for the territory's political identity were left out. A deliberate omission or not?

- Will John Paul II refer to the ecclesiastical separation of East Timor and disregard the desire of the Indonesian government to see the Church in East Timor incorporated in the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI, Komperensi Weligereja Indonesia). The Church of East Timor is still under the direct authority of the Holy See and does not form part of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Indonesia. The apostolic administrator, bishop Belo of Dili, attends the meetings of the Indonesian Bishops Conference as an observer. This, according to the pro-nuncio, will continue as long as the issue is not settled in the international forum. When this happens, he added, the Holy See will follow without hesitation. It is well known that there are two camps in Indonesia. On the one hand those who understand, and have sympathy for, the perspective of the Timorese Church. On the other hand, the more conservative -- and perhaps more powerful group -- who are preoccupied by the need to preserve the Church's long-term interests in Indonesia.

John Paul II will also have to tackle the issue of the Catholic community which, according to bishop Belo, is threatened by the Islamization of East Timor even though Catholics are still a majority. According to Governor Carrascalao, the pope's visit will allay fears that Indonesia is imposing Islamization in the disputed area and will be seen as proof of Indonesia's guarantee of freedom of religion. Bishop Belo disputes this claim stating that more mosques are being built and more Muslim traders are entering East Timor.

Whatever happens this visit hopefully might awake the international community as to the plight of the people in East Timor and bring support to bishop Belo who in a recent letters asked for a referendum on the future of East Timor and condemned the lying propaganda of the Indonesian government according to which abuses of human rights do not exist in East Timor.